



January 12, 2015

Instructional Quality Commission, California Department of Education

RE: HAF and CAPEEM's suggestions to the History-Social Science Framework as charted on the "References to Sikhs in July 2009 draft" Document

Dear Members of the Commission,

It has come to my attention that the sound suggestions made by Dr. Onkar Singh Bindra (PhD, UC Berkeley) and collated by the Sikh Coalition (NY), regarding the references to the Sikh tradition in the Californian school curriculum as they are found in the History-Social Science Framework, have been challenged by the Hindu American Foundation (HAF) and (much less so) by the California Parents for the Equalization of Educational Materials (CAPEEM).

Accurate, fair and judicious portrayal of the Sikh tradition in its scripture, literature, history, aesthetics and practice, is a subject matter that I not only take seriously, but it forms an integral part of my responsibility as an expert in the academic field of Sikh Studies and Religion more generally. The ongoing hate crimes against the Sikhs that have increased since September 11th, 2001, reveal cases of mistaken identity and general ignorance about who Sikhs are and what their tradition is. According to the *Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund* (SALDEF) there are approximately 700 cases since 9/11. Thus, the importance of appropriate, relevant and correct representations of Sikhs and Sikhism cannot be overstated. Indeed, this has been noted by Senator Loni Hancock who introduced *SB 1540: History-Social Science Framework* in 2012, when commentating on the Oak Creek massacre of Sikhs by the white supremacist Wade Michael Page (Aug 5th, 2012) in Wisconsin: "The fact that people are mindful of the tragic consequence of not understanding one another's cultures and respecting them was very much in people's minds... I think the Wisconsin tragedy, but of course, added fuel to the urgency of the bill" (Sikh News Network, Friday, September 28, 2012).

I have gone through the document prepared by the Sikh Coalition that summarizes in three columns the initial proposed changes (made by Dr. Onkar Singh Bindra), the suggestions from HAF and CAPEEM, and finally the Sikh Coalition's rebuttal and rationale for rejecting the latters' suggestions. In short, regarding each of the seven references, I would largely reject HAF's and CAPEEM's suggestions as well.

Before I detail each case in turn I need to make a preliminary observation about the (somewhat negative) nature of the comments made by HAF. That is to say, to understand why the HAF rejects the suggestions made in the first column, where essentially the Sikh is erased or minimized and South Asian is put in its place, requires the elucidation of a broader context. In the past 500 years Sikhs have been the minority under the successive rule of three hegemonic powers: first Islamic India, then British India and now "Hindu India". Across these three periods Sikhs have often been under pressure of assimilation, conversion, destruction and even attempted annihilation. In the present context of "Hindu India," Sikhs comprise approximately 2% of the total population, while Hindus make up 80%. This leads to the now well-known dynamics of majority-

minority politics, which affords the Hindu majority coercive power over the minority traditions – Sikhism being one of them. Although the academic study of Sikhism is comparatively new, there has been a major shift from very early (misinformed) representations of Sikhs as a part (“sect”) of Hinduism, or as a “synthesis” or “syncretism” of Hinduism and Islam, to understanding Sikhism as an independent tradition, distinct because of its own unique revelation and scripture, language and culture. It seems that the critique coming from the HAF as well as CAPEEM, assumes an outdated model of understanding the Sikhs and Sikhism that ignores this widely acknowledged and accepted shift in academia/religious studies/Sikh studies. When I first began studying Sikhism at postgraduate level in the 1990s, World Religions textbooks reflected the former view, but the academic study of Sikh religion and culture has since evolved and for the last decade Sikhism has been recognized in these textbooks as a tradition in its own right. This shift in scholarship is not reflected in the seven comments made by HAF and CAPEEM.

Now, let me take each point in turn (assuming you have the document in front of you to avoid repetition):

1. Replacing “**Sikhs**” with “**South Asians (from current day India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan)**...” whilst seeming to be more accurate is actually misleading, unfair and inaccurate. This is because the current term then was “Asian Indians” rather than “South Asians”. More problematically the switch to “South Asian” erases the fact that the vast majority that were there, were Sikhs. Furthermore the sentence from which this quote is taken is referring to those “who provided a new supply of labor for California’s railroads...” etc. Again, those individuals were mostly Sikhs. Erasing Sikhs for both of these reasons is factually incorrect and unfair reporting. Should this be further argued, a compromise could be: “Asian Indians who were predominantly Sikhs.” However, omitting “Sikh” is unacceptable. Please note that Harold S. Jacoby (2007, *History of East Indians in America: the first half-century experience of Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims*) a professor of sociology gives the following figures of East Indian immigrants to the US: Sikhs 80%, Hindus 9%, and Muslims 6%. Other immigration reports give the figure for Sikhs higher, 86%.
2. Replacing “**Saund, a Sikh immigrant**” with “**Saund, an Indian immigrant**”, is again inaccurate and unfair. It should be recalled that before Partition and the creation of the modern nation state of India in 1947, the Indian subcontinent was home to an immense diversity of cultures, languages and traditions – more diverse than Europe. Merely stating “Indian” is akin to saying “European” rather than “Portuguese” or “Polish,” “Swedish” or “Italian”. Omitting this difference then simply makes a general statement of historical detail. This is especially pertinent if one notes that the Sikh Kingdom (1799-1849) had existed during the time of the British who delayed their annexation of the Panjab till the very last. Not acknowledging Saund as a Sikh is nonsensical and unnecessarily vague – to the point of being myopic.
3. Regarding “**Conversion slowed in India with the emergence of Sikhism in 1469.**” I am quite shocked by the tenor of the HAF comments, which do seem to suggest that they either want to make negligible the impact of the Sikhs if not erase them from the record. There are more Sikhs than Jews in the world (approximately 24 million to 14 million), if not more. Erasing or minimizing their contribution is unacceptable and speaks of a non-academic political agenda. As noted already, Sikhism grew into a huge movement that culminated with their own egalitarian and inclusive rule in the Panjab.
4. Regarding the long quote on the so-called **Bhakti movement** involving “**saints such as Meera Bai (devotee of Krishna) and Ramananda (devotee of Ram)**...” It is true that the notion of the “bhakti movement/tradition” has been recently criticized and reassessed. In addition, I would note that in contrast to the Hindu *sants* and Sufi *pirs*, *Guru* Nanak was the only one that actually instigated a socio-political movement that turned into a full-fledged religion. Also, it should not be missed, that the HAF statement: “Sikhism grew out of opposition to Hinduism and Islam”, simply transposes the outdated scholarship mentioned above where “Sikhism is merely a syncretism of Hinduism and Islam”. The “bhaktas” of the “bhakti movement” – even if we were to assume the coherence of such a concept - did challenge orthodoxy; however, they did not substantially threaten nor change its socio-political reality, whereas

Sikhism did. This is a crucial point that HAF's statement does not acknowledge. For these reasons, it is egregious to treat the Sikh Gurus as though they were merely *sants* of the bhakti tradition, and whose efforts were socially and politically negligible.

5. This is a repetition of point 1.

6. Regarding Hindu and Sikh beliefs. I don't think there is anything substantial to note here. Both sides get their versions. It is important to observe however that though all four traditions do employ these terms: *karma*, *dharma* etc. the Buddhist notion of *dhamma*, the Jain notion of *dharma* and the Sikh notion of *dharan* are all different from each other and strongly differ from the Hindu notion of *dharma* – to such an extent that from the perspective of Hindu Dharma/Vedic Religion, the other three have historically been referred to as heterodox. Given this, the clear tendency to simplify and assimilate the former three into an "Indic" notion of Religion/Dharma is clearly driven by a political agenda. If we are to note the sharing of concepts as HAF suggests, then I would insist that this orthodox/heterodox point must also be made.

7. Regarding CAPEEM's comments. It is important to note that not only did the Sikh Gurus, but also the Hindu and Muslim Sants and Pirs, challenge the inequity of the brahmanical caste system and idol worship. This is well documented. To insist that neither should be related to a discussion on Indian religion is not only anachronistic, but also disingenuous. Religions are unavoidably socio-cultural and historical formations. The idea that one could bracket religion as merely subjective belief speaks again of outdated scholarship regarding the assumed "essence" or "spirituality" of Hinduism (for example) somehow exists independent of social and linguistic structures. Furthermore, as a scholar of religion I argue that we must not present religions to students as though they never made critical remarks against each other, as evidently they did. Religions possess both critical and inclusive sides, and it is important that we should not deny the critical dimension.

To conclude: it is for the above stated reasons that I strongly support Dr. Onkar Singh Bindra's work, that I concur with the Sikh Coalition's suggestions, and reject those put forward by HAF and CAPEEM. I trust the commission understands that correctly portraying a *visually distinctive* people that are rendered *conceptually invisible* within the North American context is the responsibility of educational institutions, media outlets and policy makers, who must be knowledgeable, accurate and judicious in their representations.

Thank you for your patience with this long letter as well as your studied consideration.

Sincerely,



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